Wildlife Watchers

REPORT ON MONITORING

Issue Seven March 2001

WILDLIFE WATCHERS IS GROWING!

We've added the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas to our list of projects

Volunteer monitoring and conservation programs continue to make important contributions to the understanding and protection of Ontario's wildlife and natural areas. There are a number of Wildlife Watchers projects and many volunteers are involved in more than one of these. Now, there is a new project to add to the Wildlife Watchers list: the second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas.

Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas

Many Wildlife Watchers participated in the first Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas that ran from 1981 to 1985. The Atlas has become an essential tool in conservation planning and priority-setting in the province and has been widely used by governmental and non-governmental agencies, municipal and county planners, researchers, and environmental consultants. It has also been a welcome addition to the bookshelves of naturalists, amateurs and professionals alike, who are interested in learning more about the identity and distribution of Ontario's breeding birds. The second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas is now underway and numerous Wildlife Watchers have already signed on!

A number of existing volunteer monitoring programs complement the Atlas venture. For example, data collected from the Forest Bird Monitoring Program and the Nocturnal Owl Survey can also be used for the Atlas. So why not make your participation official and sign up as an Atlaser? This year's Wildlife Watchers Report will introduce you to the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas and provide information and updates on some of the other programs that complement the Atlas.

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Cooperators in the Wildlife Watchers Program

The Wildlife Watchers Program has received generous support from many conservation organizations.

Our thanks to the following groups for their cooperation.

- Bird Studies Canada
- Bruce Peninsula Hawkwatch
- Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment Canada
- Federation of Ontario Naturalists
- Greater Toronto Region Raptor Watch
- Hawk Cliff Raptor Banding Station
- Long Point Bird Observatory
- Ontario Christmas Bird Counts
- Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
- Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch
- The Royal Ontario Museum
- Thunder Cape Bird Observatory

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Program Name	Time Commitment	Skills Required	Location
Amphibians: Road Call Counts	3 evenings each spring, March to July	ability to learn about 10 frog calls	7 km routes on back roads; done by car
Amphibians: Backyard Surveys	3 minutes each evening from April to August	ability to learn about 10 frog calls	your own backyard
Breeding Bird Atlas	1 or more days in spring or summer	beginner to experienced birders	anywhere in Ontario
Breeding Bird Survey	1 morning in June, every year	ability to identify breeding birds by song and sight	40 km routes on back roads; done by car
Canadian Lakes Loon Survey	check lake(s) once during each of June, July, August	identify Common Loon; good observational skills	anywhere in Ontario
Christmas Bird Count	1 day per year near Christmas time	beginner to experienced birders	about 80 cities and towns in Ontario have a CBC
Forest Bird Monitoring Program	2 mornings in late May or June, every year	ability to identify forest birds by song and sight	in wooded areas; done on foot
Hawk Watching	1 or more days in spring or fall	ability to identify raptors, but all are welcome to assist	Grimsby, Oshawa, Toronto, Port Stanley, Amherstburg
Marsh Monitoring Program	2 or 3 evenings each spring, April to June, every year	ability to identify frog calls and/or marsh birds	throughout Ontario; emphasis on marshes in the Great Lakes Basin
Migration Monitoring	days to weeks (longer term volunteers preferred)	all levels; beginners can be trained over several weeks	Long Point, Thunder Cape
Nocturnal Owl Survey	1 evening in March, 1 evening in April	ability to identify about 5 owl calls	central and northern Ontario
Ontario Birds At Risk	variable, depending on activity	beginner to experienced birders	throughout Ontario
Ontario Nest Records Scheme	1 or more visits to an active nest or nests	ability to identify any bird's (active) nest	anywhere in Ontario
Ontario Shorebird Survey	4 visits during spring migration, 8 visits in fall	experienced birders	throughout Ontario
Project Feeder Watch	observe twice every 2 weeks; November to March	ability to recognize about 25 common feeder birds	anywhere in Ontario
Red-shouldered Hawk & Spring Woodpecker Survey	1 morning in May	ability to identify raptors and woodpeckers by sight and sound; training tape provided	central Ontario

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Nicole Kopysh

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The goal of the Atlas Project is to map the distribution and relative abundance of each bird species that breeds in Ontario. To facilitate the search for birds, the province has been divided into 10 x 10-kilometer squares, which have been grouped into regions, each coordinated by a Regional Coordinator (RC). Volunteers from across the province choose a square that they would like to Atlas in and contact the RC for that region.

Volunteers then simply birdwatch in their chosen square. Many Atlasers welcome the challenge of finding all of the species breeding in their square and documenting the highest level of breeding evidence for each. During the first Atlas Project, volunteers recorded the first confirmed breeding evidence in Ontario for Bohemian Waxwing, Harris's Sparrow and Snow Bunting. One of the major benefits of Atlasing is that it provides occasion to spend time observing and learning more about the breeding behaviour of birds. If you are already involved in a Wildlife Watchers program, you may find that volunteering for the Atlas Project fits in nicely with the monitoring you are already doing.

Many of you may be wondering "If there already is a Breeding Bird Atlas, why do we need another one?" The answer is that the first Atlas, produced 20 years ago, provides a valuable benchmark for bird ranges and populations. Data collected during the second Atlas Project will be used to determine current changes in ranges and populations. The second Atlas Project will also be used to assess the impact of human activity such as urban development, forestry practices and wetland management on breeding bird populations. The importance of the Breeding Bird Atlases as a valuable tool for monitoring bird population is reflected in the fact that discussions are already underway to begin a third Atlas in another 20 years.

There are several changes to the Atlas Project this time around. A significant new dimension will be the estimation and comparison of densities of each species in different parts of its range. This data will be used to identify "hotspots" of bird diversity in Ontario. This will entail conducting point counts (this will be an optional activity for volunteers). We will also be able to identify key locations for species at risk.

There are 1,804 squares in southern Ontario alone, and each one needs to be surveyed! If you are interested in taking part, please visit our web page at http://www.birdsontario.org/atlas/atlasmain.html. It will provide you with a list of regions and coordinators, and information on training workshops being organized across the province. Be sure to attend the training workshop nearest you. You will learn how to identify bird songs, collect breeding evidence and abundance data, and be given instruction on how to use mapping coordinates and Global Positioning Systems (GPS). It is also your opportunity to meet other Atlasers, local Regional Coordinators and Atlas staff.

The Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas is a joint project sponsored by Bird Studies Canada, Canadian Wildlife Service, Federation of Ontario Naturalists, Ontario Field Ornithologists, and Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.

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Watchful Eyes on Wetland Wildlife

Mary Valliantos

For hundreds of people in the Great Lakes basin, the arrival of spring is an invitation to visit a favorite marsh. These visits are part pleasure and part business, affording not only the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors but also to be a part of the Marsh Monitoring Program (MMP), a basin-wide scientific initiative that monitors wetlands and their resident amphibians and birds. The MMP relies on its volunteers in Canada and the U.S. to track population trends of wetland species and uses this information in its work to conserve Great Lakes wetlands and their inhabitants.

The MMP provides opportunity to observe wildlife and learn more about the sounds and habits of wetland species. About 500 people have taken part in the program since its inception in 1995 and their observations are already revealing some interesting patterns about the abundance of a number of marsh birds and amphibians. A recent report summarizing five years of MMP data suggests that Black Terns, Pied-billed Grebes, American Coots, Blue-winged Teals, and Chorus Frogs may be experiencing population declines in the Great Lakes basin.

Bird Studies Canada delivers the MMP in partnership with Environment Canada and with substantial support from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Great Lakes Protection Fund.

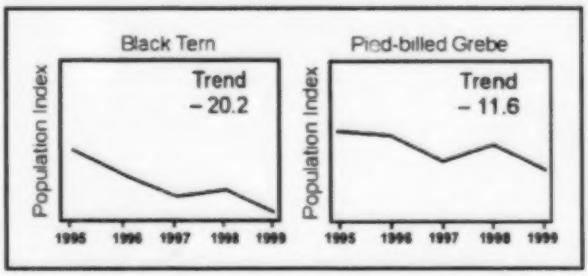

Figure 1: *Annual population indices of two wetland bird species detected on Great Lakes basin MMP routes, 1995 through 1999. Population indices are based on counts of individuals inside the MMP station boundary and are defined relative to 1999 values. The estimated annual percent change (trend) is indicated for each species.*

Red-shouldered Hawk and Spring Woodpecker Survey

Debbie Badzinski

In the 1800s, the Red-shouldered Hawk was the most common hawk in Ontario, outnumbering Red-tailed Hawks by at least 4 to 1. Today the situation is reversed. Red-shouldered Hawks are now rare, and have been designated as a nationally vulnerable species. Populations of Red-shouldered Hawks declined dramatically in the mid-1900s following the destruction of large woodlands across southern Ontario. The Red-tailed Hawk, by contrast, has thrived in the more open landscapes.

John Mitchell

Red-shouldered Hawk

Because Red-shouldered Hawks require mature forest for habitat, they were chosen as a key indicator species to monitor the effects of forest management. The Red-shouldered Hawk and Spring Woodpecker Survey was designed to provide reliable population trend data for this vulnerable species and for other hawk and woodpecker species in the province. In general, Hawks and woodpeckers are not well surveyed on other volunteer bird surveys because of their early breeding season and secretive nature.

The Red-shouldered Hawk Survey, now in its eleventh year, is coordinated by Bird Studies Canada in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Volunteers use tape playback to elicit calls of Red-shouldered Hawks along roadside routes at 20 predetermined stops during one morning in late April or early May. Volunteers keep track of the

Make Your Lake Loon Friendly!

Kathy Jones

Photo Courtesy of © Gregory M. Nelson (www.gmnphotography.com)

The mournful wails of loons are part and parcel of the Canadian wilderness. But these magnificent birds are under threat from cottage development, acid rain, pollution and other human-related activities and surveys suggest that their population has recently declined.

Participants in the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey have collected information on nesting loons since 1981. Examination of their data gives cause for some concern. For example reproductive success in Ontario seems to have declined during the last ten years; although adult loons are present on many lakes, fewer of them are fledging young birds.

There are a number of ways in which individuals can help to maintain healthy breeding habitat for loons.

- *Work to preserve the wild parts of your lake.*
- *Keep the shoreline around your cottage in a natural state, which helps to provide food and shelter for fish and loons.*
- *Use sensitive boating practices and steer clear of loons.*
- *Use non-lead sinkers and jigs and don't discard fishing line and hooks.*
- *Dispose of your garbage properly so as not to feed potential nest predators of loons such as raccoons and gulls.*
- *Get involved in national air pollution issues and local water quality programs.*
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Information on the Common Loon and on loon-friendly lakes is available free of charge. If you would like to be a participant in the CLLS, or support it as a contributing donor, send us your name and address and the $25.00 (tax creditable) registration fee. Please indicate whether you would like to receive a CLLS reporting booklet. All CLLS supporters receive annual updates on the survey and its results.

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Data from the Survey have shown that the Ontario Red-shouldered Hawk population fluctuates annually, but seems to have stabilized over the last 10 years. In addition to Red-shouldered Hawks, surveyors have recorded 11 other raptor species and seven woodpecker species. Continued monitoring of these species is required, so that we can have an early 'warning' system in place to detect any major population fluctuations.

Figure 2: *Red-shouldered Hawk distribution: Mean Number of Birds per Route 1990-2000.*

LEGEND
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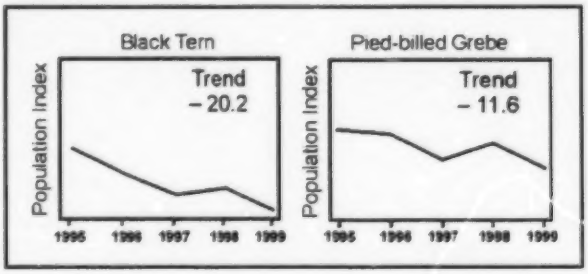

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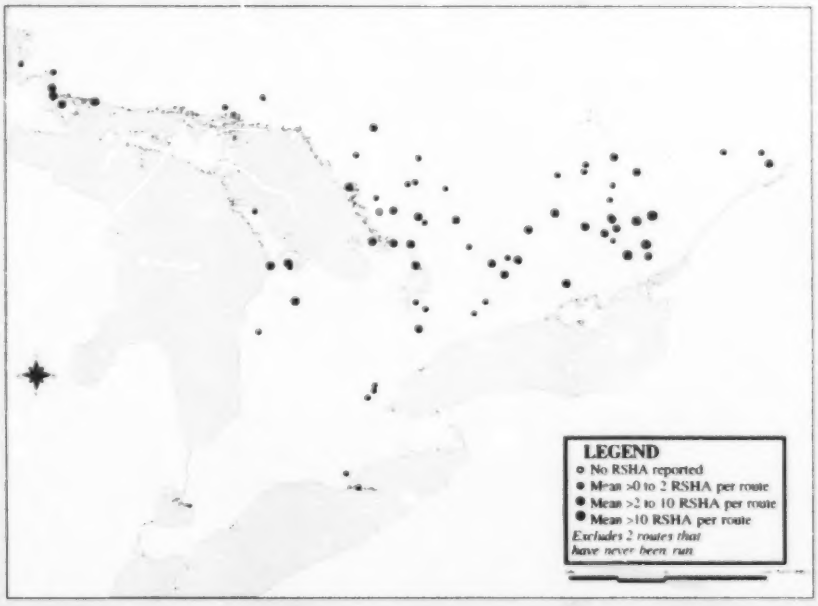
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Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey

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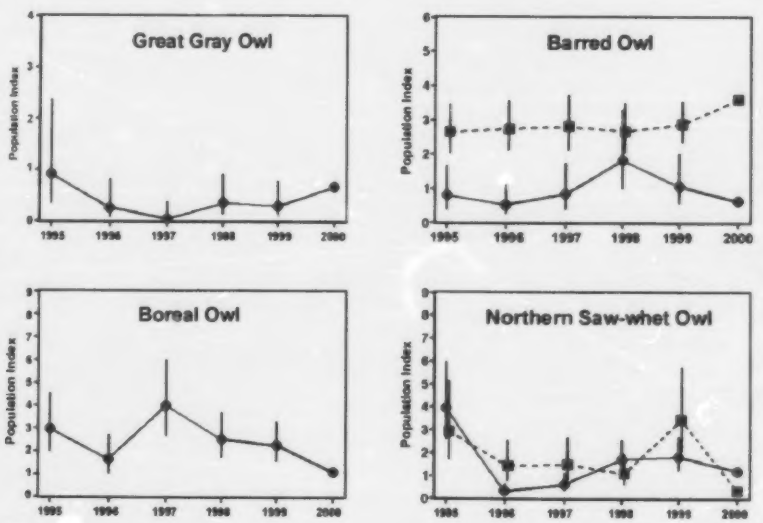
Throughout human history, owls have symbolized wisdom and knowledge, witchcraft and prophecy. The mystique surrounding owls is likely one reason the Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey is so popular with volunteers (plus the fact that it's fun!). Participation in the 2000 Owl Survey surpassed all previous records - 113 survey teams surveyed 155 routes across Ontario.

Owls are secretive birds that are rarely active during the day, which makes counting them a challenge. To effectively monitor owls, surveys must be conducted at night when the birds are most active. In 1995, Bird Studies Canada in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, created the Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey. The primary goal of the Survey is to monitor the status of Ontario's northern and central owl populations. The four target species are Great Gray Owl, Barred Owl, Boreal Owl and Northern Saw-whet Owl, species for which little information currently exists in Ontario. The Survey may answer questions such as: What type of habitat do the different species of owls prefer? How do logging practices affect them? What is their distribution across Ontario?

By analyzing data collected by volunteer surveyors, we have learned that populations of Boreal Owls and Northern Saw-whet Owls vary significantly from year to year, whereas populations of Barred Owls and Great Gray Owls appear to be more stable. In fact, in 2000, Boreal and Saw-whet Owl populations declined dramatically to their lowest levels since the survey began (Figure 1). Populations of some owl species (especially northern owls) tend to be cyclical in response to changes in availability of prey such as mice, voles and lemmings. Therefore, it is possible that the recent decline in Boreal and Northern Saw-whet Owls was part of a natural population cycle. If this was the case, we expect (and hope!) to see a subsequent population increase in following years.

Population cycles of owls are poorly understood, which highlights the need for long-term owl monitoring. Having only six years of data makes it is difficult to interpret the nature of these cycles. With the help of dedicated owl volunteers, our understanding of owl population dynamics will continue to increase as more data are collected. Thanks to all the Ontario Nocturnal Owl Surveyors whose enthusiasm and dedication are greatly appreciated.

Figure 3. *Annual population indices for the 4 target species of owls in Central (—■—) and Northern (—●—) Ontario from 1995 to 2000.*



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Ontario Nest Records Scheme

George K. Peck

Locating birds' nests and recording nest data is the most accurate and conclusive way to establish breeding and accumulate information on Ontario's breeding birds. The Ontario Nest Records Scheme (ONRS), now in its 45th year, is thus one of the most important avian monitoring programs in the province.

Our huge database of nearly 120,000 nest records (almost 2,000,000 individual nests when colonies are included) is steadily being computerized. This will eventually provide easy access to the wealth of data on the distribution, status and breeding biology of Ontario's birds. Such information is an invaluable aid to the conservation of our birdlife and to biodiversity. All available historical nest records, both published and private, are included in this database, and 283 breeding species are confirmed on nest cards, along with five other species whose nests are still undocumented or whose provincial breeding status awaits acceptance, such at the Trumpeter Swan.

Along with other Canadian nest record schemes, we are presently designing a new, scannable nest card for our contributors. These cards will be distributed to all of the participants involved with Ontario's second Breeding Bird Atlas. It is important that information on all nests found during the Atlas survey be recorded on nest cards, in order to be added to the database and fill in existing gaps.

Despite fears to the contrary, it has been well established by many field studies that nest monitoring, even with multiple visits, and if done with reasonable care, does not adversely affect nest success.

Nest cards and annual reports are supplied to contributors upon request. Completed cards are returned to the ONRS for processing, filing and computer storage. Direct computer entry and submission of nest records will hopefully be an option in the near future.

Recent Highlights

Great Egret - the continuing northward spread of its breeding range was indicated by a 1999 nesting in Presqu'ile Provincial Park, Northumberland County.

Trumpeter Swan - with a 1999 record from Haldimand-Norfolk, breeding has now been recorded in six provincial regions.

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American Robin - three ground nests were recently reported - two from Haliburton and one from York.

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Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey

Debbie Badzinski

Throughout human history, owls have symbolized wisdom and knowledge, witchcraft and prophecy. The mystique surrounding owls is likely one reason the Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey is so popular with volunteers (plus the fact that it's fun!). Participation in the 2000 Owl Survey surpassed all previous records - 113 survey teams surveyed 155 routes across Ontario.

Owls are secretive birds that are rarely active during the day, which makes counting them a challenge. To effectively monitor owls, surveys must be conducted at night when the birds are most active. In 1995, Bird Studies Canada in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, created the Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey. The primary goal of the Survey is to monitor the status of Ontario's northern and central owl populations. The four target species are Great Gray Owl, Barred Owl, Boreal Owl and Northern Saw-whet Owl, species for which little information currently exists in Ontario. The Survey may answer questions such as: What type of habitat do the different species of owls prefer? How do logging practices affect them? What is their distribution across Ontario?

By analyzing data collected by volunteer surveyors, we have learned that populations of Boreal Owls and Northern Saw-whet Owls vary significantly from year to year, whereas populations of Barred Owls and Great Gray Owls appear to be more stable. In fact, in 2000, Boreal and Saw-whet Owl populations declined dramatically to their lowest levels since the survey began (Figure 1). Populations of some owl species (especially northern owls) tend to be cyclical in response to changes in availability of prey such as mice, voles and lemmings. Therefore, it is possible that the recent decline in Boreal and Northern Saw-whet Owls was part of a natural population cycle. If this was the case, we expect (and hope!) to see a subsequent population increase in following years.

Population cycles of owls are poorly understood, which highlights the need for long-term owl monitoring. Having only six years of data makes it is difficult to interpret the nature of these cycles. With the help of dedicated owl volunteers, our understanding of owl population dynamics will continue to increase as more data are collected. Thanks to all the Ontario Nocturnal Owl Surveyors whose enthusiasm and dedication are greatly appreciated.

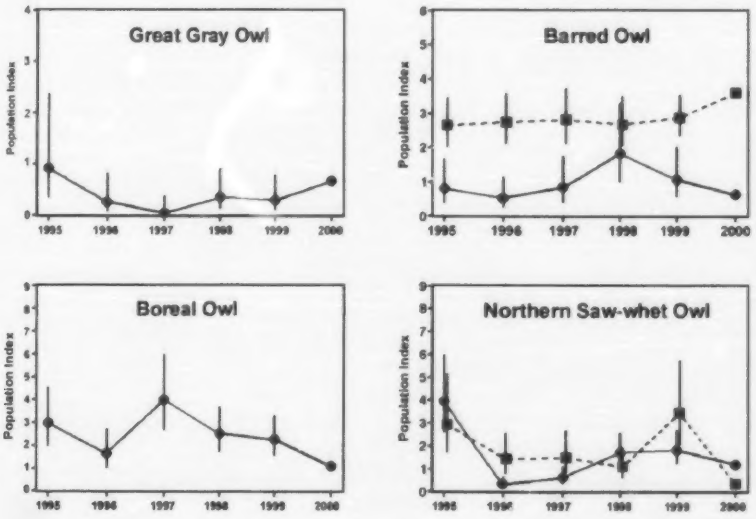

Figure 3. *Annual population indices for the 4 target species of owls in Central (—■—) and Northern (—●—) Ontario from 1995 to 2000.*

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Ontario Nest Records Scheme

George K. Peck

Locating birds' nests and recording nest data is the most accurate and conclusive way to establish breeding and accumulate information on Ontario's breeding birds. The Ontario Nest Records Scheme (ONRS), now in its 45th year, is thus one of the most important avian monitoring programs in the province.

Our huge database of nearly 120,000 nest records (almost 2,000,000 individual nests when colonies are included) is steadily being computerized. This will eventually provide easy access to the wealth of data on the distribution, status and breeding biology of Ontario's birds. Such information is an invaluable aid to the conservation of our birdlife and to biodiversity. All available historical nest records, both published and private, are included in this database, and 283 breeding species are confirmed on nest cards, along with five other species whose nests are still undocumented or whose provincial breeding status awaits acceptance, such at the Trumpeter Swan.

Along with other Canadian nest record schemes, we are presently designing a new, scannable nest card for our contributors. These cards will be distributed to all of the participants involved with Ontario's second Breeding Bird Atlas. It is important that information on all nests found during the Atlas survey be recorded on nest cards, in order to be added to the database and fill in existing gaps.

Despite fears to the contrary, it has been well established by many field studies that nest monitoring, even with multiple visits, and if done with reasonable care, does not adversely affect nest success.

Nest cards and annual reports are supplied to contributors upon request. Completed cards are returned to the ONRS for processing, filing and computer storage. Direct computer entry and submission of nest records will hopefully be an option in the near future.

Recent Highlights

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Wildlife Watchers 2001 Project Descriptions And Contact Information

For more complete descriptions of each program, please visit http://www.on.ec.gc.ca/wildlife/

Amphibians Call Counts
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Environment Canada
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Burlington, ON, L7R 4A6
Tel: (905) 336-4952
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Email: glenn.barrett@ec.gc.ca
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Breeding Bird Survey
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Canadian Lakes Loon Survey
Kathy Jones
*Bird Studies Canada
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Christmas Bird Count
Contact your local naturalist club for the name of the CBC coordinator in your area. There is a $5 participation fee.
Website: http://www.birdsource.org

Forest Bird Monitoring Program
Forest Bird Monitoring Program
Canadian Wildlife Service
Environment Canada
49 Camelot Dr.
Nepean, ON, K1A 0H3
Tel: (613) 941-5913
Fax: (613) 952-9027
Email: FBMP@ec.gc.ca
Website: http://wildspace.ec.gc.ca/

Hawk Watching
Holiday Beach
(Sept. 1-Nov. 30)
Holiday Beach Conservation Area, Essex Co., on County Road 50, approximately 10 km southeast of Amherstburg
Bob Pettit, President
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Greater Toronto Raptor Watch
(Sept. 1 - Dec.)
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Niagara Peninsula
(March 1 - May 15)
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Red-Shouldered Hawk and Spring Woodpecker Survey
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